

NEW STUDY FINDS WIDESPREAD PROBLEMS IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

Monday, 19 April 2004

Report Indicates that States are Attempting to Make Improvements, but Lack Adequate Funding and Staff

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Tuesday, April 20, 2004

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WASHINGTON

- A U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) study released today finds that a majority of States meet only half or less of the 14 measures used by the Federal government to determine the well-being of children in the child welfare system. No State passed all of the factors, which assess the safety, well-being and permanency of current and former foster children.

The GAO report, Child and Family Services Reviews: Better Use of Data and Improved Guidance Could Enhance HHS's Oversight of State Performance, also indicated that over one-half of the States responding to the survey reported that insufficient funding served as a major barrier to improving their child welfare systems. In fact, one State (Massachusetts) reported that unless it received additional funding it would be forced to lay off social workers, making it difficult to implement improvement strategies.

In response to today's report, Representative Pete Stark (D-CA), a senior Member of the Committee on Ways and Means suggested that "the report corresponds with previous studies that clearly indicate the Federal government has to increase funding to improve the quality of child welfare workers on the frontline. You cannot expect workers to make life and death decisions with huge caseloads, low salaries and inadequate training."

Representative George Miller (D-CA), the leading Democrat on the Committee on Education and Labor, declared, "this report raises serious questions about the adequacy of Federal oversight of State child welfare programs. This study is very bad news for those in the Administration who would reduce

accountability and grant even greater latitude to the States in managing their Federally financed foster care systems. With 41 State agencies failing to meet basic standards for their foster care programs, it would be foolhardy to award States a block grant in hopes they would run their programs more responsively than they do with the specific mandates in current law."

Representative

Charles B. Rangel (D-NY), the leading Democrat on the Committee on Ways and Means, declared, "the States are clearly having problems providing protection and permanency for at-risk children. We must do more to ensure that adequate oversight and resources are dedicated to safeguarding these children in crisis. If we can afford a war and huge tax cuts, then we can afford to protect vulnerable children."

Representative

Benjamin L. Cardin (D-MD), ranking Democrat on the subcommittee that has jurisdiction over the nation's child welfare system, noted, "we have heard many times that high caseloads, rapid turnover of caseworkers, inadequate training, and funding shortages for preventative services are common problems in our child welfare system. This report provides further evidence that these problems hinder our ability to ensure that children are living in safe and loving homes."

To

increase the States' accountability in improving the outcomes of children involved in the child welfare system, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) implemented the Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSR) in 2001 in response to a Congressional mandate. The CFSRs use state-provided data, along with interviews and an on-site case review, to measure performance on 14 outcome and systemic factors, such as the incidence of abuse to children already known to the child welfare system, the length of stay in foster care, and the level of services provided to meet child health and education needs. The reviews also require States to track their progress in a program improvement plan (PIP), or face financial penalties.

The GAO

report, which was requested by Reps. Charles B. Rangel (D-NY), George Miller (D-CA), Benjamin L. Cardin (D-MD), Pete Stark (D-CA), Tom DeLay (R-TX), and Senator Charles Grassley (R-IA) highlighted that a majority of States need to implement improvements in several common areas, including assessing the needs and services of children and parents; establishing the most appropriate permanency goal for a child; ensuring the stability of foster care placements; and, ensuring that caseworkers conduct fact-to-face visits with children.